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ESSAY

The Animal Logic of Contemporary Greek Cinema

Rosalind Galt

The recent wave of Greek cinema—often rather problematically named the “weird wave”—returns insistently to non-human animals. Athina Rachel Tsangari’s *Attenberg* (GR, 2010) features characters who copy the movements and sounds of wild creatures from the television nature programs of British naturalist David Attenborough, and Greek goats feature prominently in her short film *The Capsule* (GR, 2012). In Yorgos Lanthimos’s *Kynodontas/Dogtooth* (GR, 2010), dogs and cats play a small but crucial narrative role, and his recent film *The Lobster* (GR/IE/NL/GB/FR, 2015) imagines a social order in which those who fail to maintain normative sexual relations are turned into animals. Animality is a key way in which these films articulate subjectivity, power, and social relations, and yet it is not at all clear that they speak directly about animals. The films have attracted the orientaling moniker “weird” because they are hard to read, characterized by a narrative opacity that is often understood as allegorical. As claustrophobic tales of often familial oppression and violence, they have been interpreted both by popular and scholarly critics as allegories of the Greek economic crisis or of a breakdown in the Greek patriarchal family, or both.

It would not be hard to fold the films’ animal imagery into this kind of reading and to argue that non-human animals are used instrumentally as allegorical figures that speak in coded form to human concerns. In a recent essay on animal life and the moving image, Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon ask, “How do we look at animals? . . . Is this relation only ever one of capture and appropriation, thereby reiterating dominant structures of inequality between humans and animals?”¹ If we take *The Lobster* as illustrative, it seems to provide precisely a



Figure 1. Athina Rachel Tsangari's short film *The Capsule* places Greek goats in a surreal scenario.

bad object for Lawrence and McMahon's critique. The film depicts a society that, although it looks broadly like our own world, operates with alarmingly different social structures and rules of nature. Humans are compelled to live in couples, and, should they become single through death or breakup, they are transferred to a hotel. There, they have forty days to find a new mate or they will be forcibly transformed into an animal of their choosing through an unseen medical procedure. The film thus doesn't focus on animals *as* animals, rather, appropriating their performances for a fantastical human narrative in which becoming an animal is the ultimate punishment. *The Lobster* in no way resists or refuses "objectification or anthropomorphisation of the animal"—we are explicitly told that Bob the dog is our protagonist David's brother and should be read as such.² Animals consistently signify insofar as they are former humans.

Thus, just as the incestuous and violent family in *Dogtooth* is legible to many critics as a metaphor for Greece's oppressive polis, reading *The Lobster* allegorically subordinates its onscreen animals to a human narrative in which they can only signify their own cultural exploitation.³ It is not a film like *Le Quattro Volte/Four Times* (Michelangelo Frammartino, IT/DE/CH, 2010), which attempts to animate non-human points of view and subjective experiences, nor is it even like social media cat videos that bring feline life worlds into our quotidian screen experience. When Steve Baker discusses artists "whose concern is with the nature

and quality of actual animal life, or with the human experience of actual animal lives,” he is assuredly not thinking about *The Lobster’s* formerly human animals.⁴ And yet, we see something quite different from conventional animal representation here. Animals are indeed deployed to speak about human culture, but their status as exploitable cinematic subjects is never taken for granted. The film’s representation of formerly human animals is not an unthinking appropriation but rather an explicit staging of the logics of biopower and human sociality that lie at the heart of the narrative. Animals, their lives, and their representability are the very medium of *The Lobster’s* critique. There is no equitable relation in this world, either between species or among humans, and both animals and humans embody the violent stakes of this social horizon.

Moreover, although the films depict non-human animals participating in human-centered narratives, they also pose questions about the status of the animal in cinema. Excluded from social dominance, *The Lobster’s* animals often take their place at the edges of the frame or in the background of shots, visibly less central to the narrative’s concerns than the humans at its center. The film understands this relationality, which is never accidental. Framing and shot duration ensure that we notice the flamingo that walks precariously among trees to the right of Short-sighted Woman and the peacock that draws the viewer’s attention away from the Maid and the Loner Leader’s conspiracy talk. These animals pass visibly through the frame, and the choice of such colorful creatures is striking: their out-of-place quality changes our relationship to the hierarchy of framing and looking relations. Colin Farrell, the film’s Irish lead actor, would not look out of place in the Irish forest in which the film is set, but a flamingo and a peacock do. They are out of place, breaking our focus on the human actors and insisting we see the animals simultaneously as narratively significant and as real creatures. They break open the diegesis, encouraging the spectator to consider pro-filmic space and the production process of wrangling “exotic” animals in this rural European location. The animals operate as disruptors, moving us between the ontological and the epistemological or, in other words, evoking the essential fetishism of cinematic spectatorship. This capacity to speak at once as pro-filmic bodies and as fictional signifiers gives non-human animals a powerful role in Greek cinema.

This article argues that the recurring turn to animals in the contemporary Greek new wave represents not merely one metaphoric figure among many but the central way in which the films articulate the political. Debates on Greek cinema and animal studies provide generative concepts for analyzing these figures, although both discourses have found the substitutive rhetoric of animal allegory to be troublesome. Animal theory has tended to prioritize attempts to adequate a non-human sensorium or to move beyond human politics and culture, so for



Figure 2. A flamingo can be seen at the edge of the frame in *The Lobster*.

this approach the Greek films' use of allegory is hard to see as anything other than appropriative.⁵ More suggestive is Susan McHugh's account of animal-human narratives, in which she argues that historical shifts in agency are navigated through animal representation and that contemporary visual media "situate subjectivity more clearly as a collective production, a disciplinary form of power complementing rather than negating other biopolitical options."⁶ Thinking the animal-human relation in terms of power and discipline dovetails neatly with the challenges of scholarship on Greek cinema in the wake of the financial crisis. The films clearly represent systems of power and its abuses, but how much are they "about" Greek politics? Critical debate has provided some generative interrogations of Greek cinema's substitutive rhetoric—Eugenie Brinkema, for example, writes brilliantly on metaphor in *Dogtooth*—but there is still significant resistance to reading its elliptical style as functioning allegorically.⁷ In either case, the mistake would be to read Greek cinema's animals in an either/or relationship in which they either speak about the animal itself or direct us toward an occluded economic truth. Rather, I propose that the animal is a crucial participant in Greek cinema's development of a new political aesthetic whose object is to rethink the status of the subject and the potential for collective life in contemporary Europe.

Precarity, Default, and the European Imaginary

Étienne Balibar writes of the Greek debt crisis: "We cannot deal separately with the problem of Greece and with the problem of Europe."⁸ The impulse to interpret

contemporary Greek cinema as speaking about the economic crisis that began in 2007 should be understood not so much as an imperative of national cinema but as a desire to locate a cinematic form that could respond to the political question of Europe in the 21st century. Austerity, debt, and precarity have become defining terms across the continent and beyond, intersecting the policies of the European Union with broader forces of globalization and the late-capitalist ideologies that have come to be clustered under the name of neoliberalism. The post-2007 crash of several peripheral European economies (e.g., Greece, Spain, Iceland, Ireland) has led to widespread immiseration and a resurgence of popular leftist movements. But resistance to “Europe” has been reactionary as often as it has been progressive, from extreme right wing parties like the Golden Dawn in Greece to the rise of racist and anti-immigrant modes of pro-border discourse in wealthy nations such as France and the UK. What makes these recent Greek art films so appealing is that they seem to respond affectively to this deep sense of crisis without directly talking about it.

Elsewhere, I have developed the concept of default cinema in relation to this historical moment, proposing that a certain contemporary cinematic response to economic crisis can be compared to the economic strategy of default wherein a refusal to pay becomes a refusal to play by the rigged and exploitative rules of the game.⁹ In cinematic default, films refuse to play by the rules of neorealist poverty porn, not representing national impoverishment through realist form or through sentimental narratives of bodily peril.¹⁰ I argue that default films stage refusal in formal terms, resisting certain modes of narrative efficiency; opacity of events becomes a refusal to make saleable meaning. This argument could be expanded to apply to contemporary Greek cinema, and Marios Psaras has made exactly this move, reading the queerness of films like *Strella / A Woman's Way* (Koutras, GR, 2009) as a form of default cinema.¹¹

The concept of default takes on particular significance in the Greek context, as successive governments unsuccessfully tried to resist European Union, IMF, and European Central Bank austerity packages. Costas Lapavistas has insisted that “default can happen in many ways,” some of which are far from radical, and the country’s historic default on its IMF payments in June 2015 arguably offered a moment of radical potential squandered.¹² Resisting the rules of the game turned out to be the very thing that Alex Tsipras’s leftist government couldn’t do, and despite a resounding “no” vote in a national referendum, the government was compelled to accept bailout conditions that some experts warned were undermining human rights.¹³ With significant percentages of the population unemployed, without access to healthcare, and classed as living in extreme poverty, the impossibility of rejecting the so-called Troika’s conditions proved a hard failure for the Greek (and European) left. The post-crisis Greek cinema has obvious affiliations

both stylistically and politically to default cinema, but how exactly should we understand the relationship of these films to this period of intense political and economic struggle?

Unsurprisingly, there's been much debate about the extent to which the films are really "about" the crisis—since they are opaque and allegorical in tone, they can be read in multiple ways and are limited by any insistence on a single interpretative frame. Equally, it is debatable to what extent the wave emerges as a response to the economic situation, given that its most usual starting point, *Dogtooth*, was made before the crisis hit Greece. As Maria Chalkou points out, the films emerge from a set of institutional and broader social developments in Greek film culture that predate the financial crisis.¹⁴ Olga Kourelou insists that the correlation between crisis and new wave is coincidental, and expresses frustration that "the debt crisis has not only become the major trope within contemporary Greek cultural production; it also constitutes the key perspective through which almost all Greek artistic activity is currently viewed both at home and abroad."¹⁵ Kourelou rails against an overly simplistic practice in which the films are viewed as merely a coded way of speaking about the crisis, instead of locating the films in a European context. For her, the Greek wave sits, "like the crisis itself, at the intersection of the national and the transnational"¹⁶ Kourelou's demand not to instrumentalize the films as indices of EU politics is important, but she also opens up the necessity of reading the formal operations of Greek cinema in relation to more broadly constituted European crises of sovereignty.

Alex Lykidis makes a compelling argument in favor of understanding the films in relation to the debt crisis, insisting that they "enable us to understand the crisis more clearly by highlighting the disappointments and disenfranchisements of the neo-liberal era."¹⁷ In films like *Dogtooth*—and I would add *The Lobster*—power is exercised with bureaucratic literalism and ruthless severity. "In Lanthimos's films," he says, "insubordination is punished severely by authority figures. These punishments are administered calmly, indicative of the dispassionate rationalism that underlies the exercise of authority in quasi-bureaucratic contexts."¹⁸ For Lykidis, the debt crisis is best seen as a crisis of sovereignty, in which ideas of authority being established by popular consent have been violently undermined. Greece since 2007 is symptomatic of what Mario Candeias, following Colin Crouch, describes as a "post-democratic tendency where democratic procedures remain as formally intact but are substantially emptied" and in which "decisions are now presented as imperative necessities."¹⁹ Films like *Dogtooth* provide perfect visualizations of neoliberalism's anti-democratic tendency, in which power is dictatorial, violently imposed, and yet, as Lykidis describes it, "masked by rhetorical civility."²⁰ Tsipras's reluctant acceptance of bailout terms that effectively removed both the government's authority and that of the populace—and the subsequent

#thisisacoup hashtag on social media—effectively illustrate the shortcircuiting of European political institutions that Lykidis describes at an earlier stage.

Agency is at stake in these films, as indeed is a vision of Europe in which animals have returned to political discourse in a striking set of metaphors. In locating the Greek crisis within Europe, Peter Bratsis points out the racism of the name PIIGS—the commonly used acronym for the indebted and peripheral nations of Portugal, Ireland, Italy, Greece and Spain—which uses the animal metaphor of the pig to figure those who “cannot control their urges.”²¹ The communicative power of the pig/PIIGS is illustrated in political cartoons, which repeatedly drew on connotations of unconstrained appetite to present these (mostly) Southern European nations as less than civilized or less than human. In one cartoon in British right-wing tabloid *The Sun*, Europe is represented as a buffet of money being chomped excessively by gross slaver hogs. In another image, this time by conservative American cartoonist Ariail, Europe is viewed as a mother pig, a body politic being sucked dry by inconsiderate piglets. The first image hints at racialized discourses of overconsumption while the latter draws at once on gendered ideas of the nation as mother and on colonialist notions of other nations (and their inhabitants) as misbehaving children. In many similar images, we see the discursive formation of PIIGS as animals who do not quite deserve the rights of European democracy.

Countering the greedy pig discourse, Bratsis argues that, “the idea that corruption and clientelism are the sources of the crisis is a completely ideological, metaphorical understanding of the problem. It goes back to the old colonialist idea that the cause of poverty in the south is because the people are not hardworking enough, not civilised enough, and corrupt in general.”²² Just as Greece was, in 2015, the first *developed* nation to default on IMF payments, the imagery of pigs follows on from logics of Balkanism, which turned racist discourse about non-Europeans inward, applying dehumanizing colonial rhetoric to the European periphery.²³ Northern and Western Europe have historically constructed Southern and Eastern Europe as primitive, animalistic, and less than human. Representing the animal cinematically in this context suggests both a material and a figurative response to such racist imagery. (We might also think about the social media fame of Loukanikos the riot dog and why an animal became such a powerful metaphor for resistance.) Animality enables Greek cinema to speak in different terms about the neoliberal foreclosure of agency and to think about the implication of worlds hostile both to community and to the individual body.

These linkages are made plain in Ektoras Lygizos’s film *To agori troei to fagito tou pouliou/ Boy Eating the Bird’s Food* (GR, 2012), which offers an uncharacteristically direct representation of the extreme physical precarity produced by economic crisis. The film narrates the story of a young unemployed man so



Figure 3. *The Boy Eating the Bird's Food* deploys intimate bodily gesture to visualize precarity.

hungry that he steals food from his pet bird. Indeed, it opens with precisely this gesture. In a long take, the handheld camera moves up and down the young man's body as he takes the seed dispenser from the bird cage, wets his finger, sticks it into the seeds, and raises his finger back to his mouth. Hunger is made visible in the bodies of boy and bird. But if the film is obvious in its social critique, its focus on the normative acts of the body provides rather more subtle insight into how Greek cinema thinks European crisis through the animal. Yorgo and the bird are closely linked as creatures who need both food and care to survive, and the film constantly shuttles back and forth between metaphor and gesture as modes of articulating this precarious community. The camera repeatedly shoots Yorgo from behind, foreclosing on identification and insisting that we watch his movements in corporeal rather than psychological terms. In one scene, we see him masturbating, his unsimulated climax emphasizing the material regimes of the body. As is typical in Greek new cinema, there is no space for desire here. Instead, we see him tentatively lick his cum and then, with a gesture of disgust, eat it. The act is a compulsion of hunger rather than erotic pleasure, but it is also framed in a way that dislodges typical ways of visioning the impoverished body. His thumb is bent back strikingly, creating a sinuous physical performance from a close-up shot. The most intimate bodily acts have become rationalized to cope with the effects of economic precarity and gesture is the place where this regime becomes visible.

At this point in the film we have barely seen the bird. It functions as a metaphor for his hunger and inability to care for others, an unseen body in contrast to Yorgo's own hyper-visible one. The turning point comes when he takes the bird out



Figure 4. In *The Boy Eating the Bird's Food*, the bird cage is wrapped in a Greek flag.

of the apartment, removes the cloth over its cage, and addresses it directly, saying, "I won't let the cats get you." He then wraps a Greek flag around the cage and tapes it closed, saying, "I'm going to get food, I'll be back." The bird could not be a more obvious metaphor for the Greek people, wrapped in the flag, trapped and menaced by marauding cats. When Yorgo returns, the ruined building in which he stashes the bird has been locked. The bird is inside a cage, covered with a flag, and now immured inside a ruin. We can't access the animal in its materiality, and the bird again speaks for someone else, for the Greek subject who can't be reached and who has none of that which sustains life. However, in the final scene of the film, Yorgo returns with a ladder, and in a high angle long shot, the bird is visibly alive. In this last shot, the film centers an animal-human bond in which the bird is still a metaphor but also perhaps a bird. *Boy Eating the Bird's Food* demonstrates in its obviousness the pitfalls of using the animal as metaphor, but it also illustrates the impetus in Greek cinema toward using human and non-human bodies to articulate the affective regime of the present.

Animal Gesture in *Attenberg*

Athina Rachel Tsangari's *Attenberg* also makes clear the economic destruction wrought on the younger generation, but whereas the protagonist's dying father speaks directly of the failures of his generation, his daughter Marina uses a close identification with animals to speak otherwise. Lawrence and McMahon ask if cinema can nurture identifications with animals or indeed as animals, and



Figure 5. In *Attenberg*, Marina and her father act like apes.

Attenberg takes seriously such a possibility as a mode of resistance to the life-world of austerity. In one scene, Marina and her father lie in bed watching David Attenborough on television. We hear Attenborough say in voice off, “There is more meaning and mutual understanding in exchanging a glance with a gorilla than any other animal I know.” The shots of the television install a text within the text, and in this interior space, we find a claim on cross-species, non-verbal communication. Attenborough speaks of the potential of “escaping the human condition and living imaginatively in another creature’s world,” and we cut immediately to Marina and her friend Bella trotting together like birds, sticking their hands out behind them as tails. In several such unmotivated scenes, the women impersonate animals in choreographed movements that seem to respond in bodily terms to Attenborough’s idea of escape from the human world. Marina repeatedly apes televisual animals—both with Bella and as a mode of coping with her father’s terminal illness. In one scene, Marina and her father go from playing a language rhyming game to making animal noises and acting like birds and monkeys. Being animals is a way to speak, imaginatively at least, outside of power, outside of death, and outside the norms of social relations.

Non-verbal communication encoded in gestural movements of the body are directly linked to the animal here, but where *Boy Eating the Bird’s Food* separated human and non-human bodies, *Attenberg* insists on movement itself as animal. Marina and Bella repeatedly move as animals, the bonds of their relationship almost entirely enacted through bodily identification with avian and simian creatures. They take pleasure in repetition and the choreography of



Figure 6. *Attenberg* captures a television nature program about pair-bonded grebes.

being something else. Ironically, such mimicry is a uniquely human capacity, yet in moving as birds, they turn away from human language to approach a kind of freedom and jouissance in animality. In one iteration, they copy a well-known Attenborough scene of a pair of grebes whose enduring partnership is expressed through a spectacular joint display, paddling in sync across the surface of the lake. Grebes “dancing” became a viral video, an internet sensation because of its apparent ability to capture pure joy that was legible to human audiences and yet radically exterior to human experience or language. These gestures interrupt but do not obscure the political realities of Greece: the architecture of debt is clearly visible in *Attenberg*’s run-down industrial town. The film is set in Aspra Spitia, a company town planned in the 1960s to house aluminum factory workers. We can see economic degradation in the film’s realist attention to this post-industrial space, but it is animality that resists a pitying gaze.

Akira Lippit provides one way to understand these animal gestures in terms of cinematic language. For Lippit, cinema encrypts animality in its affective modes of communication. Both animals and cinema speak in non-human languages and *Attenberg* exemplifies Lippit’s vision of cinema as replete with traces of animality in its efforts to speak without language. The film’s animal animation of movement attempts to resist the deadening speech of austerity politics. But is the animal a mere metaphor here that enables escape from a debased human sociality? Lippit has theorized the cinematic animal precisely as metaphor. He writes, “One finds a fantastic transversality at work between the animal and the metaphor—the animal is already a metaphor, the metaphor an animal. Together they transport

to language, breathe into language, the vitality of another life, another expression: animal and metaphor, a metaphor made flesh, a living metaphor that is by definition not a metaphor, antimetaphor—‘animetaphor.’”²⁴ For Lippit, the animal is not just any metaphor but an originary one. Thus, he writes, “The animal brings to language something that is not part of language and remains within language as a foreign presence. That is, because the animal is said to lack the capacity for language, its function in language can only appear as an other expression, as a metaphor that originates elsewhere, is transferred from elsewhere.”²⁵ For Lippit, the animetaphor is deeply embedded in cinema’s ontology and its semiotics, always promising an affective force that transports the spectator out of the limits of language. *Attenberg*’s animality draws on this force in a way that is both material and figurative, avoiding seeing the animal as a realm of pure cinematicity but rather insisting on political allegory as a problem of cinematic life.

The opening scene of *Attenberg* speaks quite explicitly in animetaphor. It begins with a frontal, presentational shot of Marina and Bella kissing in a completely alienated fashion, with Marina acting like this is the strangest possible thing to do with her body. As Bella gives directions, human sexual acts are denaturalized—their discursive contingency laid bare. Marina complains that Bella’s tongue is “like a slug,” setting up from the film’s outset a self-reflexive animal metaphor that transports the spectator out of normative experiences of human relationality. This metaphoric substitution doesn’t depict actual animals, but rather than use animals unthinkingly, the scene makes this work of *linguistic* substitution its precise labor. Having transformed the tongue (language, sex) into an animal, the metaphor moves from the verbal to the gestural. Since Marina dislikes kissing, their movements turn into a playful fight in which the women crouch like baboons and play as monkeys. When Marina meows like a cat, this embodiment of domesticated affection ends the fight. Human relationality and subtle changes in affect can only be expressed through animal gestures, not because these are natural but precisely because they are not.

This process is quite different from the account of appropriation described by animal theorists such as Nicole Shukin, in which the animal is at once produced and erased by human signification.²⁶ In this account, dominant cinema’s capture of the animal is a bad-faith allegory, threatening the same overly simplistic one-to-one correlation that, critics like Kourelou complain, limits Greek films to being understood as “really” about the economy. But allegory, as Heidegger demonstrates, is not such a simple replacement, but a way of speaking otherwise in public.²⁷ It holds two terms together at once, insisting that mimetic forms of signification are inadequate. For this reason, it can be deployed to capture meanings that exceed or reject social norms for, unlike realism, it is not a form dedicated to recentring the hegemonic subject. If we think broadly of the Greek wave as



Figure 7. The women in *Attenberg* move as animals in synched solidarity.

allegorical in its simultaneously surreal narrative opacity and insistent political reference, then Lippit's animetaphor provides a more specific and focused way into its textual operations. *Attenberg* conjoins allegory's political ability to speak outside of socially accepted norms with the potential of the animetaphor to articulate cinematically occluded ways of thinking and being.

Animetaphor abounds in the film as a way of speaking otherwise than in the normative forms of sociality, and its dialogue often explicitly describes the world in metaphors of animality. Feeling Bella's breasts, Marina says they don't arouse her, and Bella replies, "You're a sea urchin—you don't let anyone touch you." If Marina is an urchin, the animal operates here as a metaphor for resistance to patriarchal sexuality and its limited understanding of human connection. When Marina describes a terrifying dream of a tree made of cocks, Bella tries to domesticate these frightening human parts by saying "they are like those animals you love" in *Attenborough* shows. Penises are like animals, but whereas hetero relationality is a nightmare, Marina and Bella walk in harmony. We cut to the women's knees in close-up, moving away from human language and toward animetaphor, emphasizing rhythm, proximity, and bodily motion. Their bond may not be sexual but it is gestural—they can move in sync and in wordless solidarity. Animal substitutions speak to what has become impossible in *Aspra Spritia*, but they also evoke an attenuated possibility of a sociality resistant to capitalism and the couple form.

In a sense, *Attenberg* is the most optimistic of the Greek films discussed here, offering some potential for collective life in Marina's animal cathexes. It is important, however, that this animal experience is not posed as natural but

has to be learned. In one fascinating shot, Marina practices moving her body in animal gestures. Facing away from the camera and out of the frame, she pulls her t-shirt over her head, focusing attention on the top half of her back. She flexes one shoulder blade and then the other, testing out the muscular capabilities of her body. In close-up and out of context, these physical gestures are disaggregated from familiar tropes of human subjectivity, becoming almost abject. Marina lets the t-shirt fall back partially over her shoulder blade, turning it into an uncanny skirt. She looks back around toward the camera, challenging our gaze at her body. Animality here is not a fantasmatic nature that stands in utopian contrast to human culture but is rather posed as a discipline of the body. Speaking outside of human language takes practice, and Marina finds it hard to function in the spaces offered by either parental or sexual relationships. The film constantly plays on the couple form as a problem—Marina and her father are a failed couple, her brief sexual relationship with a man is disastrous, and her friendship with Bella proceeds with difficulty outside the spaces of hetero or homo normativities. The two women demonstrate a mode of relationality that is not lesbian or even obviously desiring; but what emerges in their perfectly synchronized animal gestures is totally other to existing modes of living.

***The Lobster's* Worldmaking**

The opening scene of *The Lobster* immediately centers animal life and the potential of cinema to create worlds. A woman drives down a country road in the rain. The shot holds her face in medium close-up for over thirty seconds, building suspense. Finally, she parks, and from inside the car we watch her walk awkwardly over rough ground toward two ponies. As the windshield wipers renew our view of the bleak Irish landscape through the rain, she pulls a gun and shoots one of the ponies. We continue to watch through the windshield's static frame as she returns to the car, and, once she has exited the shot, the second pony walks over to look at its dead companion. On this image, we cut to the film's title. Nicole Shukin has outlined how animals are used to reify national discourse in a way that fetishizes white, postcolonial nationalisms.²⁸ The opening of *The Lobster* sets up such a conventional vision of cute ponies in the Irish landscape, only to overturn touristic discourses of Irishness radically with the unexpected shooting. We are at once in a recognizable, even mythic "Ireland," and, suddenly, somewhere else entirely.

The scene is surprising, even shocking, and deploys the pony's violent death to tell the viewer that this is a strange world, whose rules might be very different from our own. It's also funny, creating a doubled and uncertain affect of absurd humor and apparently unmotivated violence. Of course, all films imagine worlds but Lanthimos's films operate in a way more familiar in science fiction, where the

creation of a fully-formed imaginary world is a constitutive part of the fiction. (As Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells point out, this worldmaking impetus ensures that “perhaps more than any other genre, SF is deeply intertwined with globalization.”²⁹) The world of *The Lobster* looks like our own, but it works very differently, with different social rules, and, as the viewer will discover, a different set of technologies or laws of nature. The opening scene suggests some of these differences. The woman appears to have a relationship with the pony that points to cross-species communication. Not, to be sure, the more utopian vision of cross-species communication articulated by some animal theorists but a strong affective link all the same. The killing of the pony appears to be motivated; personal, even. Meanwhile, the way the second pony approaches the body suggests a level of awareness that invites us to anthropomorphize. What is the spectator to do with this invitation?

Here, what we know about pony subjectivity indexes our understanding of the diegesis, and this centrality of animals to knowledge of the world plays out across new Greek cinema. In *Dogtooth*, animals likewise function as a key vector of inside and outside. The film depicts a family of grown-up children who have been raised entirely inside their family’s compound and have been told that the world outside is perilous. No outside influences are allowed by the abusive father, and cats with their ability to wander freely in and out of the compound’s garden represent a potential threat to this closed system. The children have been told that cats are vicious and dangerous, representatives of the threatening Outside. When a cat encroaches into the garden, the children kill it in the film’s first shocking act of violence. But when they blame a marauding cat for a knife wound inflicted by one of the siblings on another, the father knows they are lying (since he knows, as do we, that cats, thankfully, can’t use weapons). Thus, cats form an important vector between the inside world and the outside—what you know about cats is one way of describing a person’s place in this structure. In thus using animals to delineate the shapes of their fantastical worlds, these films reverse the normative use of animal signs described by Shukin. She says, “What makes animal signs unusually potent discursive alibis of power is . . . that particularist political ideologies, by ventriloquizing them, appear to speak from the universal and disinterested place of nature.”³⁰ In these Greek films, the opposite of this operation occurs; rather than naturalizing it, animals make power visible.

The Lobster pushes this visibility the farthest, imagining a world in which single people are compulsorily turned into animals. The film thus presents a particularly wry version of the posthuman, in which posthuman is what you become if you forfeit the right to humanity by refusing to obey (or being incapable of obeying) the law. The mise-en-scène is thus littered with extraneous animals—including a pony whom we first met as a young woman—who are not, upon



Figure 8. In *The Lobster*, Bob the dog is presented as David's brother.

transformation, rehomed in appropriate surroundings. Some animals remain with their human families, rearranging the bonds of the domestic. David lives with his beloved brother, but Bob is now a sheepdog rather than a person. The film takes for granted this cross-species bond and thus implies that subjectivity is not determined or limited by species. The film presents Bob simply as David's brother. There is no suggestion that the dog has less subjectivity than he did as a human but similarly no sense that the formerly-human animals are fake animals or categorically different in some way from any other animal. However, David's own choice to be turned into a lobster refuses even these modes of living: a lobster is hard to form affective bonds with, hard even to imagine as having any kind of self-aware subjectivity. This is an animal that humans eat and even one that domestic cooks often kill themselves. Lobsters, the spectator is pretty sure, have no self-knowledge. So in proposing to become a lobster, David is essentially threatening to step out of the world as it is constituted. This dark crustacean fantasy is the only path out of the repressive power system that the film offers to us.

Indeed, *The Lobster* illustrates the value of thinking these films in relation to animal theory's posthumanism. Cary Wolfe insists that we pay attention to "how particular artistic strategies themselves depend upon or resist a certain humanism that is quite independent of the manifest content of the artwork: the fact that it may be 'about' nonhuman animals in some obvious way."³¹ In exactly this way, *The Lobster* uses cinematic form to resist normative humanist discourse and to unsettle our usual relationships to non-human animals. The film at once depends on and problematizes dominant attitudes to animals (shooting the cute pony, turning

people into dogs), creating a viewer who is often uncomfortable and uncertain how to feel. In a way, these human-nonhuman hybrids resonate with Baker's work on "botched taxidermy" in the sculptures of Angela Singer, or even with Wolfe's analysis of genetically manipulated animals and their transformation into transgenic art.³² In each of these cases, form enables a displacement of humanist ways of thinking and seeing. In *The Lobster*, that posthumanist vision is correlated to a resolutely anti-humanist politics.

It's a truism that sci-fi worlds tell us about the ideologies of our own, and *The Lobster*'s fictional social universe places the animal at the center of a critique of normative forms of gender, sexuality, and most insistently the family as modes of social regulation. We can see the insistent presence of animals in the film's recurring scenes of explanation, scenes in which the spectator is simultaneously given key information about the film's world and denied full understanding. These scenes confuse as much as they elucidate, and both spectator and protagonist are made anxious about the stakes of these social rules. In this first such scene, David arrives at the hotel and is inducted by an unseen staff member. He is questioned about his relationship history and asked if he wants to be registered as heterosexual or homosexual. He hesitates then asks if can identify as bisexual, but the agent informs him that bisexual is no longer an option. We learn that sexuality is regulated in a binary way, where homosexuality can be normalized but any potential for bisexuality presents insuperable "operational problems." This binary account of sexuality echoes the presiding binaries of couple or single, human or animal, in society or outlawed, which regulate the fictional world.

Meanwhile, Bob the sheepdog is an unseen presence who remains offscreen but whose whines are constantly audible. The dog is crucial to the film's production of a social system. Most simply, he indicates that we're in a fantastical world in which David's brother could have been turned into a dog. But the unseen whine also sets up a cinematic articulation of animality to social power. Voice off is used repeatedly in key scenes of animal and human interaction, and Bob's voice speaks of a potential for resistance to the also unseen managerial voice of the hotel staffer. Separating the body and voice of the dog opens up a question of his cinematic ontology—the materiality of the subject is put into question early on, and it's an animal who invokes this problem. If animal bodies often signify in cinema primarily as markers of indexicality, *The Lobster* quickly decouples them from any straightforward realism. In this scene, Bob and David exist together only in cinema's virtual space, and where the image track keeps our focus narrowly on David's perspective, the soundtrack provides a non-human vocalization of reproach. Bob's whines remind us that there is no outside of the ideology being expressed by the unseen hotel worker, that what it means to reject this system is not to be human, literally. And yet that impossible outside is constantly audible and

visible, and a large part of the social system is devoted to policing the production of these non-human subjects.

Animality also encodes the film's disciplinary discourse, becoming the staging place for the violence of its sociality. The hotel treats humans like animals when those who have escaped its confines are hunted in the woods with tranquilizer guns. They are also physically trained, and their "animal instincts" redirected. Bodily control de-humanizes the guests with regard to sexuality: in one scene, non-compliance with rules against masturbation is met with physical torture, since desire outside the couple form is forbidden. As in *Boy Eating the Bird's Food*, *Attenberg* and indeed *Dogtooth*, sexual acts are represented primarily as problems for power structures to manage. It is not only the hotel as an avatar of power from above that turns to animals in exercising regulatory control over bodies. At one point David enters into a sexual relationship with a sociopathic woman in an attempt to game the system. Suspecting that he is not as heartless as he pretends to be, she kills Bob and announces this act to David, impersonating the dog's dying cries to taunt him. Ventriloquizing an animal, she reanimates Bob's voice precisely as she puts the image of his corpse to use as a spectacular scene of punishment.

This physical discipline continues in the film's second half, when David escapes the hotel and joins a band of outlaws. The outlaws are at first appealing in their rejection of compulsory coupledness, but the film soon disabuses the spectator of any optimism. Another explanatory scene makes clear that the outlaws—so-called Loners—are also attached to biopolitical control, as their leader explains to David that any romantic or sexual connection is strictly forbidden. At once, David is introduced to a man whose mouth has been bandaged and bloodied in a punishment called the red kiss. He was caught kissing a fellow Loner and, as punishment, was forced to continue kissing her with their mouths cut open. Over an image track of the leader roping a pig, the voiceover describes a series of such actions, culminating in the "red intercourse," of which the speaker is especially afraid. The pig, meanwhile, is destined for cooking, and here again an animal is linked formally with human violence and bodily discipline. Punishment is always corporeal and often sexualized, and sexuality is always a problem of social regulation. However, if *The Lobster* can be seen as an animetaphorical text about the violence of dominant modes of sociality, it also insists on a creaturely response to that order's oppressions.

André Bazin has written eloquently on the importance of the animal to cinema, and responses to his work trace a debate that helps us home in on *The Lobster*'s animal politics. Serge Daney writes about the power, for Bazin, of framing humans and animals together: "We can see that what justifies the prohibition of editing, of fragmentation, is not only, as has often been said, the exploitation of depth of field . . . but also, and above all, the *nature* of what is being filmed, the

status of the protagonists (in this case men and animals) who are forced to share the screen, sometimes at the risk of their lives.”³³ Here, he refers among other examples to the whale who attacks the Kon Tiki expedition and the bull who kills the bullfighter in Bazin’s most famous animal essays.³⁴ To these examples, we might add the encounter between David Attenborough and the gorilla embedded in *Attenberg*, in which, despite talking of the potential for cross-species communication, the naturalist was nonetheless scared and at serious risk. In this risky framing, Daney finds that “the essence of cinema becomes a story about animals.”³⁵

Jennifer Fay builds on Daney, revising his claim on the animal and human sharing a frame:

I, however, am interested in what this shared enframing may reveal about the status of the human in relation to animals more generally. Bazin’s attention to human/animal propinquity tells us that his humanism is more capacious and creaturely than is typically acknowledged. . . . His realism, as re-imagined through animals and nature, is not merely the replication or record of the world as we humans perceive it . . . rather, it reveals the details of animate and inanimate life that are lost to anthropocentric attention and history.³⁶

Fay redirects interest from the ontology of danger and death to a more holistic account of animate life, and thus to a less violent mode of framing animals with humans. In analyses of films from *Umberto D* (Vittorio de Sica, IT, 1952) to *Le peuple migrateur/Winged Migration* (Jacques Perrin, Jacques Cluzaud, Michel Debats, FR/DE/IT/ES/CH, 2001), she interrogates the historical and cultural locatedness of animal-human interactions. Seeking to “unmoor the human as the center of knowledge,” Fay’s project is to “open Bazin’s aesthetics up to posthuman ethics.”³⁷

Shared enframing is exactly what happens in the scenes across *The Lobster*—many of them narratively significant—in which background animals distract attention from the humans in the center of the frame. A peacock picks its way across the scene in which we learn that the Greek hotel maid is a spy for the loners. In the scene in which David and his secret lover first kiss, we see the pony who was once a human character wander by behind them. And as the leader of the Loners hears documentary proof of this forbidden affair, a camel climbs nonchalantly across the frame.³⁸ These animals are not important because they threaten humans, or even interact with humans, and yet their apparent flânerie is not merely random.³⁹ In proposing a creaturely cinema, Anat Pick argues, “The human-animal distinction constitutes an arena in which relations of power operate with an exemplary purity.”⁴⁰

Where *The Lobster*’s narrative dramatically polices that border, the film’s

mise-en-scène insists on the continuing presence of animals in the diegetic world. These shared enframements crystallize that social relation, at once making visible the human power of life and death over animals (through a metaphoric use of humans *as* animals) *and* deploying that power relation to speak about political violence in Europe.

The Lobster engages the politics of subjectivity in a way that resonates with Fay's posthuman ethics. These animals, produced as those whom human society rejects and forcefully expels, are nonetheless compelled to remain present and visible on its margins, reduced to a kind of bare life. In a doubled political affect, these animetaphors refer at once to animality itself and to those subjects who have been forcefully excluded from full humanity in Europe. Circling back to Daney, it is striking that he ends his essay with the challenge: "Politics. How to film the 'coming into consciousness'?"⁴¹ He cites Bazin's description of *L'Afrique vous parle/Africa Speaks!* (Paul Hoeffler and Walter Futter, US, 1930) in which, "a Negro gets eaten by a crocodile."⁴² Framing animals and people together does not only provide a frisson of ontological risk. More importantly, it opens the question of how cinema can adequately figure crisis, threat, violence, and the space of the political, and how it might respond to engrained geopolitical hierarchies, even thinking outside of colonial vision. *The Lobster's* non-human animals create gestures in a Brechtian sense, their bodily movements interrupting the smooth unfolding of narrative and arresting the function of dominant ideologies. Like Bob's offscreen whines, their encroachment into the frame speaks clearly of what is excluded from the spaces of sociality, which bodies are violence, and who cannot be included in the category of the human.

Economic crisis is less directly visible in *The Lobster* than in *Attenberg* or *Boy Eating the Bird's Food*, but each of these films insists on the animal as a figure at once cinematic and historically eloquent. If we agree with Étienne Balibar that there is a crisis of democracy in Europe and that the economic problems of Greece are inseparable from this larger emergency, then to read the so-called Greek weird wave in relation to the crisis becomes an opportunity to leverage the potential for a new political aesthetic in contemporary European cinema. (Here, the non-Greek language and setting of *The Lobster* is especially telling: in moving to a transnational mode of production, Lanthimos turns to Ireland, another of the PIIGS of Europe.) The insistence on animality as a mode of cinematic figuration provides in these films a way to articulate a European structure of feeling, an as yet dispersed and emergent mode of speaking about and outside of the determining language of austerity and debt. Fay links Bazin's writing on the animal in postwar cinema to Hannah Arendt's work, in the same period, on the refugee as a figure whose humanity is removed and who is reduced discursively to the status of animal. This connection takes on fresh relevance when thinking of contemporary Europe—a

place in which the refugee is once again dehumanized in popular discourse, in which the beaches of Greece are a landing place for thousands of migrants, and where the status of the human and our potential for collective living is again so gravely at risk.

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NOTES

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2. Lawrence and McMahon, 2.
3. See for example Ipek Celik, "Family as Internal Border in *Dogtooth*," in *Frontiers of Screen History: Imagining European Borders in Cinema, 1945-2010*, eds. Raita Merivirta, Kimmo Ahonen, Heta Mulari, and Rami Mäkhä (Bristol: Intellect, 2013), 217-233.
4. Steve Baker, *Artist | Animal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 3.
5. See, for instance, Cynthia Chris, *Watching Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006). Jonathan Burt also has an account of the history of appropriating animals to human concepts in *Animals in Film* (London: Reaktion, 2002), 92.
6. Susan McHugh, *Animal Stories: Narrating Across Species Lines* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 3.
7. Eugenie Brinkema, "e.g. *Dogtooth*," *World Picture* 7 (2012).
8. Étienne Balibar, "The Greek Crisis," *Journal of Modern Greek Studies* 28, no. 2 (2010), 306.
9. Rosalind Galt, "Default Cinema: Queering Economic Crisis in Argentina and Beyond," *Screen* 54, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 62-81.
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 15. Olga Kourelou, Mariana Liz, and Belén Vidal, “Crisis and Creativity: the New Cinemas of Portugal, Greece and Spain,” *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 12, nos. 1–2 (2014): 138.
 16. Kourelou, Liz, and Vidal, 134.
 17. Alex Lykidis, “Crisis of Sovereignty in Recent Greek Cinema,” *Journal of Greek Media and Culture* 1, no. 1 (2015): 10.
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 21. Peter Bratsis, in Lapavistas, 301.
 22. Bratsis, 302.
 23. See, for example, Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
 24. Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 165.
 25. Lippit, 166.
 26. Nicole Shukin, *Animal Capital: Rendering Life in Biopolitical Times* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).
 27. Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *The Continental Aesthetics Reader*, edited by Clive Cazeaux, translated by Albert Hofstadter (London: Routledge, 2000).
 28. Shukin, 1–6.
 29. Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells, *Simultaneous Worlds: Global Science Fiction Cinema* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 7.
 30. Shukin, 5.
 31. Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism?* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 146.
 32. Baker, 165–175; Wolfe, 145–167.
 33. Serge Daney, “The Screen of Fantasy: Bazin and Animals,” trans. Mark A. Cohen, in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 32–33.
 34. André Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration,” in *What Is Cinema, Vol. 1*, trans. Hugh Gray,

- (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 154–163; “Death Every Afternoon,” trans. Mark A. Cohen, in *Margulies*, 27–31.
35. Daney, 32.
 36. Jennifer Fay, “Seeing / Loving Animals: André Bazin’s Posthumanism,” *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 1 (2008): 41–64.
 37. Fay, 42–43.
 38. These animals are determinedly animate: it’s almost impossible to capture them in still images since, in a crowded frame, it is their movement that captures our attention.
 39. I’m grateful to Mary Ann Doane for pointing out this key distinction in representational terms.
 40. Anat Pick, *Creaturely Poetics: Animality and Vulnerability in Literature and Film* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1.
 41. Daney, 41.
 42. Bazin, “Cinema and Exploration,” 47, and cited in Daney, 33.